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John MacKerras
1856

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SERMON

PREACHED ON OCCASION OF THE
GENERAL THANKSGIVING ON THE
PROCLAMATION OF PEACE;

BY THE

REV. JOHN COOK, D.D.,

MINISTER OF ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH, QUEBEC.

“ He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty ; and
he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.”—
PROVERBS xvi. 32.

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TO
THE TRUSTEES AND ELDERS
OF
ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH,
QUEBEC;

This Discourse

PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST,

IS RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED.

QUEBEC, July, 1856.

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A SERMON

PREACHED ON OCCASION OF

THE GENERAL THANKSGIVING ON THE PROCLAMATION
OF PEACE.

PROVERBS XVI. 32.

“He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.”

It is, in certain circumstances, as two great nations have recently had reason to acknowledge, no easy matter “to take a city.” And very high qualities may require to be brought into play, ere the work can be fully and effectually done. For the city may be so situated as to render it difficult of access to an enemy, and nature and art may have combined to strengthen it. It may be surrounded with fortifications, constructed according to the best methods suggested by military science and experience. It may be defended by a gallant garrison,—every man of it prepared to die, rather than to surrender. It may be amply stored with munitions of war, and with provisions for the support of its defenders. It may be so circumstanced, that the attention of the whole civilized world shall be turned

to the siege, and the garrison within its walls, be not only stimulated by the strong sympathies of their countrymen, and the hope of reinforcement and supply from the government, which had confided to them so important a trust, but also, by the universal interest, which they know to be felt in the result of the conflict. To lay low a city so defended,—to plant a hostile standard on its walls,—or to level them with the dust, may require,—has we know required, the united force of mighty nations—the expenditure of vast treasures,—the sacrifice of an almost countless number of lives,—and to come to personal qualities, the utmost amount of intrepid enterprize, and of patient endurance, which could be, expected of brave men, trained and disciplined, to fight the battles of their country, and to stand at all hazards for its independence and honor. Far be it from us to detract from the difficulties of such an enterprize, or from the honour of those who have been successful in the execution of it. It is not a little for a man to boast of, that in such an enterprize, he had his share, and did his part—bravely, patiently, manfully, as it needed to be done. It is a great thing—because implying great qualities of heart and mind, for a man to have been the leader in such an enterprize—to have planned and presided over it, and carried it on to a successful termination. And it is a great thing for a nation—if the cause be just, and

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such as it can uphold before Him, who is King and Head of all, to give its men and its treasure, its science and its energy, to the accomplishment of such an enterprize, undeterred by difficulties, and only stimulated to fresh exertion by calamity, or by temporary defeat and disappointment.

The text does not dispute that it is a great thing so to do. It rather takes it for granted. It assumes it, as what no one will deny—as what all will readily acknowledge. Nor is it assuredly, immediately after the great drama has been acted out, to which the world's attention has been directed for the last two years, and the events of which must ever give an important page to the world's history, that any one will feel inclined to call it in question. Yet, here in the text, is something else spoken of,—something which the inspired writer compares with such an enterprise, even when begun gallantly, conducted wisely, and terminated successfully,—and to which he unhesitatingly accords the palm of superiority. Not the conquest of a city, he says, is so great thing, as is a man's conquest of himself—his mastery over his own passions—his ruling and controuling of his own spirit. In strifes and wars external to a man, there may be noble qualities called forth, and the world that witnesses them, gives them honor. But in the war within a man,—between passions pleading and pressing for indulgence, and galled by

restraint put upon them—and the principles of right and reason, claiming, in the soul, a just supremacy, there are yet nobler victories to be gained,—on which, though no other eye should see them, the eye of God rests with approval,—and though no other book should record them, they are recorded in the book of God's everlasting remembrance,—and though no tongue should celebrate them here below, they will, in the day when the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed, receive their just meed of approbation, from the lips of Him who is the Judge of all. To conquer others is much. To conquer one self is more. Many have been conquerors in the world's battles who have failed egregiously in this inward strife, between passion on the one hand, and reason and conscience on the other. The very men who have taken cities, have been often slaves to their own passions, and have given way to their worst and most hateful impulses. The text disparages not the qualities that are needful in the former case,—but it sets above them, the qualities that are wanting in the latter case, and the unbiassed judgments of men go along with the decision of the text. The inward transcends the outward strife. The moral transcends the physical triumph. The power of command is greater in the one than in the others—and the victory is the more honourable. Self-control is the noblest attribute of man—not

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the extinction of the passions—but the rule and government of them, in accordance with the dictates of conscience, and the will of God.

It is not the immediate purpose of this discourse to set forth either the necessity in all, of such inward conflict, or the nobleness of the victories which principle gains over passion. The former must be obvious to every one, who feels the workings of sinful passion in his nature—and yet is not insensible to the claims of right or to the voice of conscience more or less enlightened, which declares these claims, and of God who requires that they be implicitly submitted to. The latter must be obvious to all, and felt in the hearts of all, to whom these claims appears in anything like their just power and proportion. Rather, I would urge every one to begin,—or to carry on the conflict,—the daily strife, between the powers of good and of evil within himself,—and to rejoice, that in such a conflict, there is room for the putting forth of the noblest energies,—and there are triumphs to be gained, before which those of the most successful leaders in the strifes of men sink into insignificance. Every Christian is in virtue of his Christianity a soldier, and through the grace of Christ, he must be a conqueror. It is not given only to some to fight. It is required of all. And “all,” as the pious old English Poet has it,

“All may have

“If they dare choose, a glorious life or grave.”

Make the choice. I beseech you, my brethren, one and all of you. Make the choice now—those of you who have yet been insensible to the necessity of self government,—according to the light of conscience and of God's word. Wherefore stand we here, or why are we employed, from week to week, to speak to you, and deal with the spirits that are in you, and bring forth arguments to move them, and have weight with them, but that ye may be won to enter on the strife with evil—and that fighting under the standard of Him who is the Captain of Salvation, that ye may gain the honours and rewards of victory. Oh dull, dead souls, that are engaged in no conflict, will nothing, hope or fear, promises or threatenings serve to quicken and arouse you? Will ye rather be ruled than rule, rather be slaves than masters, rather have appetite and passion govern, than that God should govern you, by the reason and the revelation which He hath given you? You admire the courage of the men who scaled the heights of Alma, and stood against such formidable odds at Inkermann, and you would have spoken of them with scorn had they tamely and ingloriously withdrawn before the enemy, and fled from the dangers of the battle. But what cowards are those of you, who shrink from the battles of faith and conscience, and covet not to be conquerors in that moral strife—in which Christ is the leader and Commander, and

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the prize,—the crown of life which the Lord will Himself bestow. Arise and fight thou torpid, sin-governed soul or those passions, to which thou tamely yieldest now, will be in thee, and over thee tyrants for ever. And fight *now*, or the time for the battle may pass unimproved away. Fight now, and the spirit of the Lord will help thee in the battle, and make thee conqueror, and more than conqueror !

But though it is ordinarily with and, in regard of the individual conscience, that we have to speak, and it is thus, that we desire to address it, the occasion calls at present for something more general. There are passions to be controuled and governed in every man—and it is noble in each instance—to strive and to conquer. But there are passions to which masses of men, associated by common ties of nation, of party, of sect, are also subject,—and which, it is the noble proof of the existence and the power of right principle to check and to restrain. In particular, it has been the passion of nations, to engage in war,—to covet the glory of successful war,—to strive through war, and in despite of all the horrors, which render it, wherever it exists, a calamity and a curse, to gain an extension of dominion, and to hold a more conspicuous place in the world. It is the place of principle—gaining though the ascendancy which it has acquired in individuals, an ascendancy over the general

mind, to contend with this passion, to keep it in check, to bring it into subjection—so that war shall be accounted,—not the greatest evil, for that it is not,—there are worse and greater evils, in the rule of oppression and tyranny, evils more deadening to the energies,—more destructive of the happiness,—more injurious to the progress and advancement of mankind, than there is in war,—yet so that it be accounted, one of the greatest evils—and the most to be deprecated, so that it be reluctantly engaged in, and only as at the pressing call of duty and of national safety, so that it be gladly and promptly brought to an end, whenever the purposes for which it was begun, have been attained, and peace may safely be re-established. There are no words strong enough to express the wickedness of a war spirit, a spirit coveting war for its own sake, or for glory, or for empire. But there is a moral glory about the triumphs, and the sufferings, and privations of a war, entered into with reluctance, persevered in only because of its justice and necessity, and which is put an end to, as soon as the cause which called for it will admit, adding unspeakably to the worth and value of the achievements which may have distinguished it. In such triumphs a good man can rejoice, and while he deplors the suffering, he may admit the necessity of it. In the power of principle, causing war to be so regarded, and repressing

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the too common and natural desire, to regard it otherwise, and to pursue it, from other motives, and with other ends in view, the prevalence of the power of Christianity is to be joyfully and thankfully recognized ;—the proof, that the Gospel, however far short, it has yet come of the beneficent purpose of its great Author, or of what under the working of his Spirit, it is yet destined to accomplish, is beginning more powerfully and effectually to leaven the mass of men, with its benign tempers and dispositions,—proof, that morally, as well as materially, the race is making advancement,—and that though it be by slow degrees, and not with the rapidity, which man who is but of a day, and continueth not, would like to witness, and more as becomes the working of Him, with whom, one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years, as one day, the world is advancing to that millennial period, when Christ, either personally, or in the undisputed sway of the principles, which he inculcated, is to reign over a holy and a happy world. And it is for such proof of self controul and self government,—and restraint upon passion too generally dominant among the masses of men—such self-controul, and self government, as the text places above the taking of a city, or the issue of the most successful war, that there is, as we apprehend, very special cause at this time, to give thanks to the God of grace and mercy from whom all good gifts do come.

Not that there is not abundant cause for thankfulness in the actual results of the war which has just been brought to a conclusion. It is ground of thankfulness, that the long period of peace and material prosperity which Britain has enjoyed, neither made her insensible to the claims of justice, nor her children less courageous to fight against oppression. It is ground of thankfulness, that amidst all the early calamities of the war—and the long deferred fulfilment of its expectations, the spirit of the country never quailed for a moment, nor did its determination ever waver, to stand by the right, and to see the right done. It is ground of thankfulness, that there was everywhere awakened over the empire a spirit of patriotism and of charity—and of willingness to submit to the necessary sacrifices in the cause. It is ground of thankfulness, that a spirit of amity—and a disposition cordially to co-operate, prevailed among the allied nations. It is ground of thankfulness, that the march of the conqueror and oppressor was stayed, and in the destruction of his fleet, and fortress, and army, such a lesson was given, as may serve for many a day, to restrain the ambitious dynasty which rules over the Russian Empire, from prosecuting the projects of conquest, which have been so long contemplated. It is ground of thankfulness, that a way has been opened for greater commercial intercourse with the nations of the East, and for

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bringing them more under civilizing and Chris-
 tianizing influences. It is ground of thankful-
 ness, that, mainly through the intervention of a
 British ambassador, backed by the influence and
 authority of the British nation, religious liberty has
 been established in Turkey—opportunity afford-
 ed for the introduction of the Gospel among the
 deluded followers of Mahomet—and a prospect
 opened up of reformation and revival of religion,
 among the nominal adherents of Christianity in
 the East. It is ground of thankfulness, that some
 way seems to have been taken towards the estab-
 lishment of a system, by which wars may be
 prevented, without injustice being suffered, or
 the weak oppressed by the strong. Much, far
 more than we can describe or conceive has been
 suffered—much that under a better management,
 might have been avoided,—much that was un-
 avoidable,—much that it is heart rending to con-
 template. Amidst the acclamations of a nation's
 triumph, we must not shut our ears to the groans
 of the wounded and dying, or be indifferent to
 the bursting anguish of the widows and orphans,
 to whom those triumphs brought only bereave-
 ment and desolation. Yet is it reason for thank-
 fulness, that the suffering was not all in vain,—
 that by means of it, at least a step has been gained
 for the world, in the direction of progress and
 advancement, and additional ground given to
 every lover of his race to hope for the further im-

provement, and to every believer in the Gospel, to look for its more rapid extension over the world,---while the British nation has neither tarnished the lustre of its victories, nor belied the principles which it professed at the commencement of the war, by seeking or obtaining any direct or immediate advantage to itself. Its commercial advantages came unsought, and are free to others as well as to it.

But independent of all these, perhaps as much, as for any, or for all of them, is there cause of thankfulness for the sober, self-controuling spirit in which the war was begun and ended. It was begun, neither for the gratification of national vanity, nor with a view to national aggrandisement. There is at times in nations, something of the swagger and bravado, of a man, who, because he is, or thinks he is strong, is anxious to show his strength, and to win applause by it. And sometimes in nations, as in individuals, there is the rapacious spirit which casts a covetous eye on the possessions of others. But it was not to such impulses that the last war is to be attributed. There was a feeling of sympathy with the oppressed. There was a sense of obligation which had been solemnly assumed. There was a reasonable apprehension that the oppressor of Turkey might by degrees, if unchecked and unresisted, become the conqueror of Europe, and irreparable injury be done to the

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independence of nations and the liberties of mankind. On these points the feeling of the nation and of its rulers was the same. Yet, there was neither bluster nor bravado. There was an honestly felt, and openly expressed repugnance to war, nor was the sword drawn till the efforts of diplomacy had failed, and every remonstrance proved vain. There are those who object to the course which was then taken as a matter of policy. But as a matter of principle, it was honorable to the temper of the nation, and a token of the prevalence of Christian feeling, over national prejudices and passions,—while, it is to be remembered, that in right principle, there is always found to be involved, the highest and best policy.

And in what circumstances has the sword, which was drawn so reluctantly, been replaced in the scabbard. It was not while the proud fortress was standing, from which was threatened the independence of Europe,—not while our soldiers were perishing by thousands in the trenches before Sebastopol, and in the hospitals of Balaklava and Scutari,—not while a spirit of confusion seemed to have come over the counsels of our wisest statesmen,—or when even the elements of nature appeared to be fighting against us. It was after victory had been gained amidst all discouragements,—when the national spirit was highest, and the national

resources called forth to the utmost,—when there was an army fully prepared for war, and a fleet upon the ocean, such as the world had never before seen,—when if either glory or aggrandisement had been the deliberate aim of the British people, or the desire to humble an enemy to the dust, there was the fullest reason to expect that these objects might be attained,—it was then, that with a sober wisdom, and self-controul, such as that which the text commends, as better than the taking of a city, the temptation, to go beyond the original and legitimate objects of the war, was put aside, and peace was re-established, on terms which the enemy could accept without dishonour. It cannot indeed be said that all have appreciated this sober wisdom, or that there has been no murmuring, that with such mighty means more was not accomplished. But the general mind of the nation has appreciated and approved of it. It has been felt that neither the power nor the opportunity to war successfully, can make war just or right. And what the national passion might have desired, the national conscience so to speak, has not ostentatiously, but calmly resisted. And is not this cause of thankfulness,—the predominance of a sense of right, over passion,—the predominance of the love of peace, over that hateful war feeling, which for selfish objects has been the cause of so much misery to the world,—the prevalence of

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Christian principles, in regard of wherein consists a nation's honor and a nation's duty? If it is meet and right that we should thank God for temporal mercies,—for the daily bounties of his Providence,—for the stated recurrence of seed time and harvest,—for the blessings of peace and order,—and for victory in war,—recognizing in all things the hand, and power, and sovereignty of God, surely it is of yet more binding obligation to give thanks for whatever indicates the working of His Spirit, and the increasing power of that precious truth which He has revealed to men for their guidance through this life, to the glory and blessedness of another and better life?

There has been proof, at this time, that Christianity is still continuing to do, what from its first introduction into the world, it has always been doing,—to raise, that is, the standard of morals in the world, and bring the general apprehension and acknowledgment of what is right, to a nearer conformity with the pure principles which its Great Author inculcated, and would have all men to receive. If we compare the world's standard with that of the Gospel, we shall see only what the Gospel has yet failed to accomplish. But if we compare the moral standard now with what it was in former ages, we shall see how much the Gospel has actually done, and how on multitudes of points far higher views and feelings of duty prevail, than were

once entertained or dreamed of. To learn what the Gospel has done for society, the moral standard of a Heathen must be compared with that of a Christian nation, and the moral standard of a nation, in which true Christianity prevails, with what that was a century, or centuries ago. It will be found, that while the difference between individual character continues as marked and manifest as ever, there has been a general rise in the moral sentiment of all, and much is now condemned, which would once have been praised, and practised with but little remorse. And there is much in this, for which it behoves us collectively and individually to be thankful. We gain by the better order which prevails in society. We gain by the sway of better feelings in ourselves. Yet let us beware of pluming ourselves, or giving way to self-gratulation, on account of these, as if we were morally and spiritually, more meritorious than those who went before us. There is no merit in our knowing powers of nature, or methods of applying them to the uses of life, which in former ages were unknown. Neither is there any special merit in the participation of a moral sentiment which has become general. The tide may float a vessel from the rocks, without skill or effort, in the mariners whom it contains. And the tide of moral sentiment may carry a man out of temptations, and away from practices, which prevailed

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in less favoured periods. But no one is to think highly of himself, because in his own age, he falls not into the vices of former ages. A man is not necessarily a saint above David's measure, because he has not fallen, or been inclined to fall into David's sins. The true Christian rises above the common standard—not of former ages, but of his own. It is ever required of him that he do more than others,—and he is and must be,—in virtue, not of a prevailing sentiment, however introduced, and however excellent, but in virtue of a faith which contemplates Christ,—His person, His doctrine, His work, His promises, and power, and grace, and love—more sensitive than others, in his apprehension of what is evil,—more earnest in his efforts to resist and renounce it,—more pure in his feelings, and more holy in his aspirations after conformity to the mind and will of God. There are evils in thine own heart,—O professing believer,—evils which thou knowest and acknowledgest. What avails thy better knowledge or feelings, or practice, as compared with those of men in past ages, if against these thou art not daily striving? In such striving alone is there token of Christian earnestness and sincerity. And daily victories are the pledges of God's presence and working in the soul, sanctifying it now, and preparing it for future glory. Shrink not then, I beseech you brethren, from this holy warfare, but rather fight in it, from day

to day, as becometh good soldiers of Jesus Chaist. Seek to have the moral controul which reason, and conscience, and God's word requires over appetite and passion, and forget not the saying of the wise man in the text, "He that ruleth his spirit is better than he that taketh a city."

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